

VZCZCXR07057

OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #1599/01 2841521

ZNY SSSSS ZZH

O 111521Z OCT 07

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9702

RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE IMMEDIATE

RHMFISS/USCENTCOM SPECIAL HANDLING MACDILL AFB FL IMMEDIATE

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK IMMEDIATE 1567

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO IMMEDIATE 1696

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 BEIRUT 001599

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DOD:PLEASE PASS TO USD-P EDELMAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/10/2027

TAGS: PGOV PREL MASS MCAP SY IS LE

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF U/S DEFENSE EDELMAN

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for reasons 1.4(b)and (d).

OVERVIEW

¶1. (C) Under Secretary Edelman: Welcome back to Lebanon. Your trip provides an excellent opportunity to reinforce the message of strong U.S. government support for Lebanon. You come during a critical period of the presidential election season. Parliament elects the president and is supposed to do so in a two-month period September 24-November 24, with the next electoral session scheduled for October 23. What is at stake in this election are two competing visions, one envisioning a free, independent, and sovereign country, the other a Lebanon under the de facto hegemony of Syria. The March 14 majority, whom we support, feels under severe threat, with MPs taking extraordinary security precautions in the aftermath of the September 19 assassination of another one of their members of Parliament, Antoine Ghanem. You will find that presidential politics color everything in Lebanon today, affecting even our ability to bring visitors and experts to GOL offices.

¶2. (C) The Lebanese are still debating the lessons of a three-month battle between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Sunni extremists in the Nahr al-Barid (NAB) refugee camp in northern Lebanon. While the LAF won both militarily and from a public relations standpoint, the conflict revealed that the 57,000 LAF personnel are stretched thin with responsibilities to guard the country's 450 kilometer border, patrol south Lebanon for the first time in 30 years, and control the perimeters of eleven other Palestinian refugee camps elsewhere in the country. Another potential challenge for the LAF is how to react to destabilizing activities by the Hizballah-led opposition that has already tried to bring down the Siniora government through cabinet resignations and demonstrations.

¶3. (C) Despite a number of challenges and the pro-Syrian boycott of government, the Siniora cabinet and parliamentary majority have tried to move forward on reform policies to make Lebanon more secure and prosperous. The IMF has applauded the GOL's management of economic policy. The Siniora government's term ends right after the end of the presidential term on November 24. The widely-held view is that Majority leader Saad Hariri will become the new PM if he wants to, but there is the chance that Siniora, or another Sunni, will be asked to accept the PM post and form a new government.

Continued Political Divides

¶ 14. (C) Lebanon is once again at a crossroads as it strives to elect its first made-in-Lebanon president since the April 2005 withdrawal of Syrian troops. The Lebanese presidency is traditionally held by a Maronite Christian, but the Christian community is deeply divided between the government "March 14" coalition and the opposition "March 8" bloc that includes Hizballah. At stake are two competing visions for the country, one envisioning a free, independent, and sovereign country, the other a Lebanon under the de facto hegemony of Syria. Meanwhile, Hizballah quietly continues to build its military, communication, economic, and social networks, providing services in the place of the Lebanese state. There are credible reports of factions re-armament in anticipation of increased tension over the presidential election. Violence cannot be ruled out

¶ 15. (C) The March 14 majority, based on its interpretation of an admittedly ambiguous constitution, asserts its right to elect one of its two presidential candidates, Nassib Lahoud or Boutros Harb, with an absolute parliamentary majority. The opposition March 8 asserts that a quorum of two-thirds of Parliament members is required to elect a president, giving March 8 an effective veto through its control of a quorum. While March 14 leaders count on U.S. and international support for their interpretation that they can elect a president with their parliamentary majority, they may be underestimating the potential costs to Lebanon of a divisive election. The LAF, for example, may not be able to maintain unity if forced to choose political sides.

¶ 16. (C) The pro-Syrian March 8 movement's strategy is to

BEIRUT 00001599 002 OF 005

force a so-called consensus candidate of its own choosing. March 8 uses threats of a presidential vacuum, chaos, or declaration of a dual government, should its view not prevail. Under these scenarios, the president would presumably be powerless to enforce calls for Hizballah's disarmament and implementation of UNSCRs 1559 and 1701, and would be an easy pawn in Syria's efforts to impede the work of the Special Tribunal. The opposition appears to be pursuing a longer term strategy by electing a weak president that allows the opposition to buy enough time for Hizballah and Syria to increase their influence.

¶ 17. (C) Your arrival coincides with the next key period in the election process. In the coming days, the parliament could, should the two sides agree, amend the constitution to allow sitting government officials like Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman and Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh to become candidates. March 14 leaders, citing Sleiman's reluctance to stem Hizballah's arms smuggling, believe that Sleiman is one of the stealth pro-Syrian candidates. Yet given the LAF's victory in the Nahr al-Barid fight, Sleiman has considerable popular opinion on his side. (Note: Consistent with UNSCR 1559, we, too, have advised against further such amendments to the constitution. However, we have also said that if the Lebanese -- not the Syrians -- truly reach a consensus on this issue, we will not stand in the way. We find such a consensus to be unlikely. End Note.)

¶ 18. (C) Assumptions about U.S. interference in this election continues to be hot topic in the press. March 14 parliamentary leader Saad Hariri met with President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Secretary Rice, and others during his visit to Washington on October 3. Druse leader Walid Jumblatt heads to Washington on October 13 and is scheduled to meet with the Vice President, NSC Director Hadley, and Secretary Rice, if her travel schedule permits. Balancing

SIPDIS

these high level Muslim visitors, Christian Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouwad plans to visit the U.S. shortly.

The pro-Syrian local press insists that these visits are evidence that the U.S. is involved as a mediator or decision-maker in presidential elections, and your visit to Beirut may add to this impression. We are not, however, advocating any particular candidate and recommend that you avoid any appearance of entering into the "name game."

ASSESSING THE SINIORA LEGACY

¶19. (C) PM Siniora, whom you will meet, has demonstrated remarkable endurance and commitment to democratic rule in his two years as prime minister. Through an unanticipated war with Israel in 2006, difficult cease-fire negotiations, coup attempts by a well-financed and unscrupulous opposition led by Hizballah, multiple assassinations and assassination attempts of his political allies and political in-fighting among his own coalition, PM Siniora has held the Lebanese government together. His term ends with the swearing-in of a new president, which should happen on November 24. It is widely assumed that Majority leader Saad Hariri will become PM in the next cabinet. It is possible that, instead, Siniora will be asked to return as PM or another Sunni will be designated (the PM is traditionally Sunni).

¶10. (C) Syria's deeply held desire to re-establish its dominance over Lebanon is alive and well. The current president, Emile Lahoud, makes no secret of his allegiance to Syria and he has effectively stalled many of the pro-reform programs Siniora has tried to implement. We have minimized our contacts with Lahoud since Parliament approved a Syrian-led three year extension of his term in 2004.

SECURITY SERVICES: VICTORIOUS BUT STILL UNDER GREAT STRAIN

¶11. (S) Elite units of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) emerged victorious on September 2 from a hard-fought battle against Sunni extremists in the dense urban environment of the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp (normally home to 35,000 Palestinians) in northern Lebanon. The battle erupted on May 20, when Fatah al-Islam (FAI) militants struck LAF units following a raid by Lebanon's Internal Security Forces on a FAI hideout in nearby Tripoli. Part of the determination of

BEIRUT 00001599 003 OF 005

the LAF soldiers during this fight can be traced to the murder of soldiers during the first few hours of the conflict. In fifteen weeks of tough fighting, 168 LAF soldiers were killed and over 2,000 left severely wounded or crippled. From a public relations standpoint, the LAF triumphed. The LAF's unity endured despite heavy losses and a drawn-out battle. The return of soldiers to Beirut after the NAB victory was met with dancing in the streets, flowers and fireworks. LAF soldiers killed in action were treated as heroes during a moving commemoration ceremony on October 6.

¶12. (C) The influx of U.S.-supplied weaponry was essential to the LAF's success at Nahr al-Barid. Pro-democratic forces, both in and outside the government, believed that success of this battle was critical and they pulled out all the stops to obtain assistance from the USG and others for the troops. There has been some polite complaining by LAF leadership that we did not comply with their requests for "precision" weapons. The requests did not reflect full understanding of engagement constraints at NAB, to say nothing about the lack of pertinent training. Nonetheless, as the still relevant Martz report predicted a year ago, the LAF desperately continues to need a re-supply of munitions and upgrades for their intelligence and urban war-fighting capacities to face threats such as that it faced in Nahr al-Barid. While the extensive positive publicity around Admiral Fallon's recent visit did much to dispel the myths, the pro-Syrian media continues to peddle the story that our assistance to the LAF is given only belatedly and begrudgingly.

¶13. (C) The LAF is the primary state institution supported by all of Lebanon's confessions. USG support to the LAF, which is traditionally led by a Christian, does not endanger the delicate balance between Christian and Shia, Sunni and Druse Muslims. Other security services struggle to overcome their image as sectarian forces. The Internal Security Force (ISF), Lebanon's national police force, is seen as "Sunni"-flavored through close association with Parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri. On October 5, Ambassador Feltman signed an agreement with the ISF for a \$60 million INL cooperative program that we view as a partner activity to our support to the LAF: Lebanon needs both a professional army and a professional police force. The Surete Generale, which covers internal police activities, such as anti-trafficking in persons, anti-piracy, anti-organized crime, is generally thought to be Shia-based. Both the ISF and Surete Generale badly need assistance in the form of training and equipment to fulfill their responsibilities. This new INL program will provide some of that to the ISF.

A POROUS BORDER....AND SHEBAAA

¶14. (C) One year after the 2006 war with Israel, Lebanon is awash once more in weapons. Despite efforts to improve border security by positioning approximately 8,000 additional LAF troops along the border with Syria, all evidence indicates that weapons smuggling has continued unabated to both Hizballah and Palestinian rejectionist groups resident in Lebanon.

¶15. (C) The most serious attempt to counter smuggling is the German-led Northern Border Pilot Project. The project is already 10 weeks behind schedule and not expected to become operational until mid-November. The pilot project will operate only to the less problematic northern border with Syria, while it appears the primary flow of weaponry and militants cross into Lebanon is through the long eastern border with Syria. There have been extensive discussions in Washington and Brussels to extend the project to the more difficult eastern border. Separately, there is discussion in the EU about a European border monitoring project under the European Security and Defense Policy. An assessment team from the European Commission is due in Lebanon in November. This began with a misguided proposal by Spanish FM Moratinos to engage the Syrians, and we have expressed our misgivings that as the Europeans proceed, they not provide Syria with a means to claim cooperation while withholding serious action on border cooperation.

¶16. (C) As he is wont to do, Siniora and others may raise with you another border issue: Shebaa Farms. This is a 45-square kilometer piece of contested land controlled by Israel that the UN has formally recognized as Syrian, but

BEIRUT 00001599 004 OF 005

which Siniora's government steadfastly maintains is Lebanese. Although it is an insignificant slice of border territory with no inhabitants, PM Siniora with tiresome regularity argues that if it could be transferred from Israeli control to UN oversight, it would give his government the instrument it needs to force the disarming of Hizballah's powerful militia. Despite our expressions of skepticism, Siniora raises Shebaa with every senior U.S. official he meets.

YOUR INTERLOCUTORS

¶17. (C) Prime Minister Siniora has been a good partner to the U.S. However, he remains sensitive about Lebanon being grouped with other "problem children" in the region, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. When we speak to him about U.S. assistance, we often try to stress that our military relations with Lebanon are similar to those with other key allies, such as Jordan and Egypt.

¶18. (C) Elias Murr, Defense Minister and Deputy Prime Minister has taken great pride in our expanded military cooperation over the past 12 months. He is also not shy about taking his share of the credit. He was instrumental in the passage of our bilateral Acquisition and Cross Servicing Agreement (ACSA), even playing a role from his hospital bed as he was being treated for wounds received in a July 2005 assassination attempt. He is very good at focusing on strategic level concepts and -- while he is an expert at embellishment and putting himself in the central role of all positive developments -- you will find him to be a knowledgeable interlocutor.

¶19. (C) LAF Commander Sleiman has tended to focus on tactical level issues with recent VIPs, but we will stress to him ahead of time that you are here to explore strategic-level policy topics. Sleiman seems to have become squeamish about USG activities in the sensitive weeks leading up to the presidential elections: while he insists that his request that we delay the Nahr al-Barid After Action Review because of the LAF's legitimate operational needs in the tense security environment now prevailing, we suspect he also wanted to avoid any controversial findings just before the electoral vote.

EMBASSY EVACUATION CAPABILITIES

¶20. (C) We would like to take this opportunity to take advantage of your Foreign Service background and raise an embassy operation issue with you. EUCOM staff recently told us that, due to reallocation of assets in the theater and deployments to Iraq, helicopter and sealift assets would not be readily available if Embassy Beirut needed to implement another evacuation along the lines of our 2006 NEO. Although Lebanon is in CENTCOM's area of responsibility, EUCOM currently has responsibility for Embassy support, NEO Support and UNIFIL Support in Lebanon based on a Secretary of Defense directive. EUCOM's support, including providing air and sea assets, was crucial to the successful evacuation in 2006 of some 15,000 American citizens. We would like to ask for your support as we work more closely with EUCOM to assure that the necessary resources are available in a timely manner should the need arise.

CONCLUSION

¶21. (SBU) Under Secretary Edelman, you arrive at an important time when Lebanon is at yet another crossroads. Your visit is a good opportunity to deliver several key messages, as follows:

-- Use opportunities to re-confirm America's commitment to Lebanon and her struggle for sovereign, independent rule throughout the country. That includes the military equipment that the USG continues to provide the LAF.

-- With regard to upcoming presidential elections, underscore the message that the U.S. supports the process but does not have a favored candidate -- it is up to the Lebanese to decide.

-- Avoid actions that could be interpreted as favoring LAF

BEIRUT 00001599 005 OF 005

commander Sleiman's presidential ambitions.

-- Provide assurances in response to concerns that we might be tempted to trade away our strong support for Lebanon's sovereignty for concessions elsewhere in the region. Specifically, the Lebanese worry that we may make a deal with Syria at Lebanon's expense, such as allowing the return of Syrian dominance in return for Syrian cooperation on Iraq.

FELTMAN